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**Dispossession, exploitation or employment? Youth livelihoods  
and extractive industry investment in Sierra Leone**

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**Abstract**

The impacts that increased transnational extractive industry investments are having on local populations in natural resource-rich regions of sub-Saharan Africa are diverse, far-reaching and complex. A surge of recent investment has been variously met by resistance and rejection, by acquiescence combined with demands for better labour conditions, and outright acceptance in anticipation of gainful employment. Drawing on recent field-based research carried out in diamondiferous Kono District in Sierra Leone, this paper critically explores these contrasting responses to mining activities, with a particular focus on how youth perceive and respond to extractive industry expansion. The analysis is particularly crucial in the case of Sierra Leone, as Kono's prime alluvial diamond areas are becoming 'mined out', and artisanal and small-scale operations are being replaced by more capital intensive modes of mechanised extraction. In an environment where the demand for unskilled labour is diminishing, and young people are facing pressing livelihood needs in an employment-constrained economy, youth are playing important roles in rights-based mobilizations around mining. The paper aims to broaden understanding of youth perceptions of mining investment, and illuminate the various factors underlying a diverse range of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. It concludes by reflecting on how youth perceptions of extractive industry expansion may also be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies.

**Introduction**

Since the 1990s, soaring global commodity prices and heightened demands for natural resources from the world's emerging economies have led to significant growth in extractive industry investment across sub-Saharan Africa (Bridge, 2004). However, as many natural resource-rich African countries have become increasingly reliant on the export of mineral resources, paradoxically, the very localities where mining takes place are often among the poorest and most economically depressed. In such communities, evidence suggests that youth – understood here as a social category defined by a combination of age, social status and relative livelihood dependence – are in particularly disadvantaged positions. Indeed, even in areas of abundant natural resource wealth, young people often lack access to land, credit, employment opportunities, and other assets. While youth may have pressing livelihood needs, a surge of investment in mining and hydrocarbon projects across Africa has triggered a variety of responses amongst young people – ranging from outright

rejection, to protest over labour conditions, to acceptance in anticipation of gainful employment. Whether youth perceive resource extraction as a process of exploitation or opportunity largely depends on how this encounter is constructed by a range of social actors, and which constructions come to dominate how different actors experience and make sense of extraction.

Focusing on the case of Sierra Leone, this paper critically explores contrasting youth perceptions of, and responses to, extractive industry expansion. In Sierra Leone, youth challenges are critical given that 79 per cent of the population is under the age of 35 years, and 75 per cent of those under 30 are unemployed (Peeters et al, 2009). Moreover, concerns for youth livelihoods and youth empowerment are particularly salient, given that the country's civil war of the 1990s is often linked to an underlying 'crisis of youth' which, it is argued, prompted large numbers of socially marginalized young people to embrace conflict in a desperate search for empowerment (Peters and Richards, 1998; Richards, 1996). In the post-war period, youth issues have increasingly commanded international donor and NGO attention, returning to centre stage on policy agendas and featuring prominently in the community development strategies that many extractive companies are currently pursuing.

In this context, the objectives of this paper are twofold: first, drawing upon the concepts of 'accumulation by exploitation' and 'accumulation by dispossession' (after Harvey, 2003), it seeks to illustrate how changing global-economic patterns and processes associated with extractive industry investment in Africa are opening up 'new fields for capital accumulation' (Harvey, 2006: 153), while simultaneously radically reshaping livelihood opportunities for young people in resource-rich communities; and second, it aims to understand how youth perceptions of, and responses to, extractive industry expansion may be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies. Drawing upon field-based research carried out in Sierra Leone's diamondiferous Kono District, where there has been a recent proliferation of foreign interest in mineral extraction, the paper critically explores heterogeneity within the social category of youth, and its relationship to social activism, mining and livelihoods. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were carried out with different groupings of youth based upon similarity and difference (e.g. students, rural youth working in mining and those not, and by gender and ethnicity). These were complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with mining company officials to understand how, if at all, corporate practices and strategies were being shaped by youth issues. For young people in Kono District, it was apparent that the underlying agendas and motivations for engaging with mining companies varied considerably between different subgroupings of youth, as did the responses of companies to these different voices.

Following this introduction, the first section of the paper contextualises the wider global political economy that is shaping the on-going and rapid expansion of extractive industry investments in sub-Saharan Africa. More specifically, the tenets of neoliberalism are briefly reviewed and some of its associated social and environmental impacts are explored, as indigenous populations are displaced and key livelihood resources, such as land, minerals and water, are appropriated during the process of accumulation. This discussion sets the stage for section two, which locates Sierra Leone within this process. Here, youth perceptions of mining investment are explored to illuminate the factors underlying a diversity of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. This analysis follows on to section three, which reflects upon how youth responses to extractive industry expansion may be

influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies. Ultimately, as is suggested in the conclusion, a better understanding of how diverse interpretations of 'sustainability' become shaped by conflicting interests and underlying agendas remains critical for ensuring that young people in Sierra Leone become included in development processes that have for so long been dominated by powerful actors.

### **The extractive industries and neoliberalism in Africa**

In Marx's original critique of capitalism in Europe during the eighteenth century, the notion of 'primitive accumulation' was used to describe the process whereby labour became commoditised and a proletariat class was created to serve the interests – and accumulate wealth – for a bourgeoisie class, who owned the means of production. While Marx was mainly concerned with transformations taking place in Europe, and in fact wrote very little about what we now refer to as the developing world, he did describe the exploitation of mineral wealth by the Spanish in the New World as a classic example of primitive accumulation (Marx, 1990). It was not until much later in the 1960s, that emerging neo-Marxist concerns for underdevelopment in newly independent Third World countries drew on Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, which then paved the way for a long tradition of scholarship that explored the unequal relationships between 'core' and 'periphery' in the context of natural resource extraction (Frank, 1967; 1969; Wallerstein, 1974). In more recent years, these concerns have once again returned to centre stage, largely in response to increasingly asymmetrical power relationships between global extractive industry corporations and weak peripheral nation-states (Akiwumi, 2012).

In particular, building on the original tenets of Marxist thought, Harvey's (2003) concepts of 'accumulation by exploitation' and 'accumulation by dispossession' have been employed by a number of critical scholars concerned with the extractive industries and development, to broaden understanding of the uneven nature of global capitalism and its unequal benefits in poor countries in the global south (Holden et al., 2011; Bebbington et al., 2008). While the first form of accumulation has historically been concerned with labour exploitation and unequal relations of production, the second has addressed the appropriation of key livelihood resources, such as land, minerals and water. However, while Harvey (2003) presents these two forms of accumulation as phenomena with a real existence based on how value is transferred to owners of capital, they might also be considered as social constructions of the various actors involved. That is, whether resource extraction is perceived as a process of 'exploitation', 'dispossession' or 'opportunity enhancement' depends largely on how this encounter is constructed by a range of social actors, and which constructions come to dominate how different actors experience and make sense of extraction.

The impacts that transnational extractive industries corporations are having on both the governments and communities in resource-rich African countries are indeed complex and far-reaching. As noted by Hilson, "[f]ew industrial activities have as large an environmental footprint and are capable of wielding as much influence on the wellbeing of a society as a large-scale mine or oil and gas project" (2012: 133). While more efficient technologies have now made resource extraction faster and more profitable than the processes which featured during the colonial period, Rostovian discourses of 'modernization' and 'progress' have remained driving narratives in justifying and legitimizing extractive industry investment in sub-Saharan Africa. As noted by Bridge (2008), the extractive industries are no longer merely regarded as commercial activities but rather '...a means for territorial modernization, marking an important shift in the meaning of development from an

immanent process to an intentional state-centred project' (2008: 390). Mining and oil and gas projects are often justified by employing specific theories of modernization, such as 'big push' modernization or by reference to regional growth-poles, and according to the World Bank, the role of African governments should be to stimulate these pathways to development by removing the barriers to investment. Above all, these discourses stress that social value can be achieved through investments in large infrastructure projects, which 'together with the external markets available for mineral products, provide opportunities for a resource-rich region to 'plug into' the global economy and offset low regional rates of consumption and savings' (Bridge, 2008: 391). According to this position, the extractives sector will stimulate 'multiplier effects' which will foster economic growth, leading to increased levels of socio-economic development and well-being (Pegg, 2006).

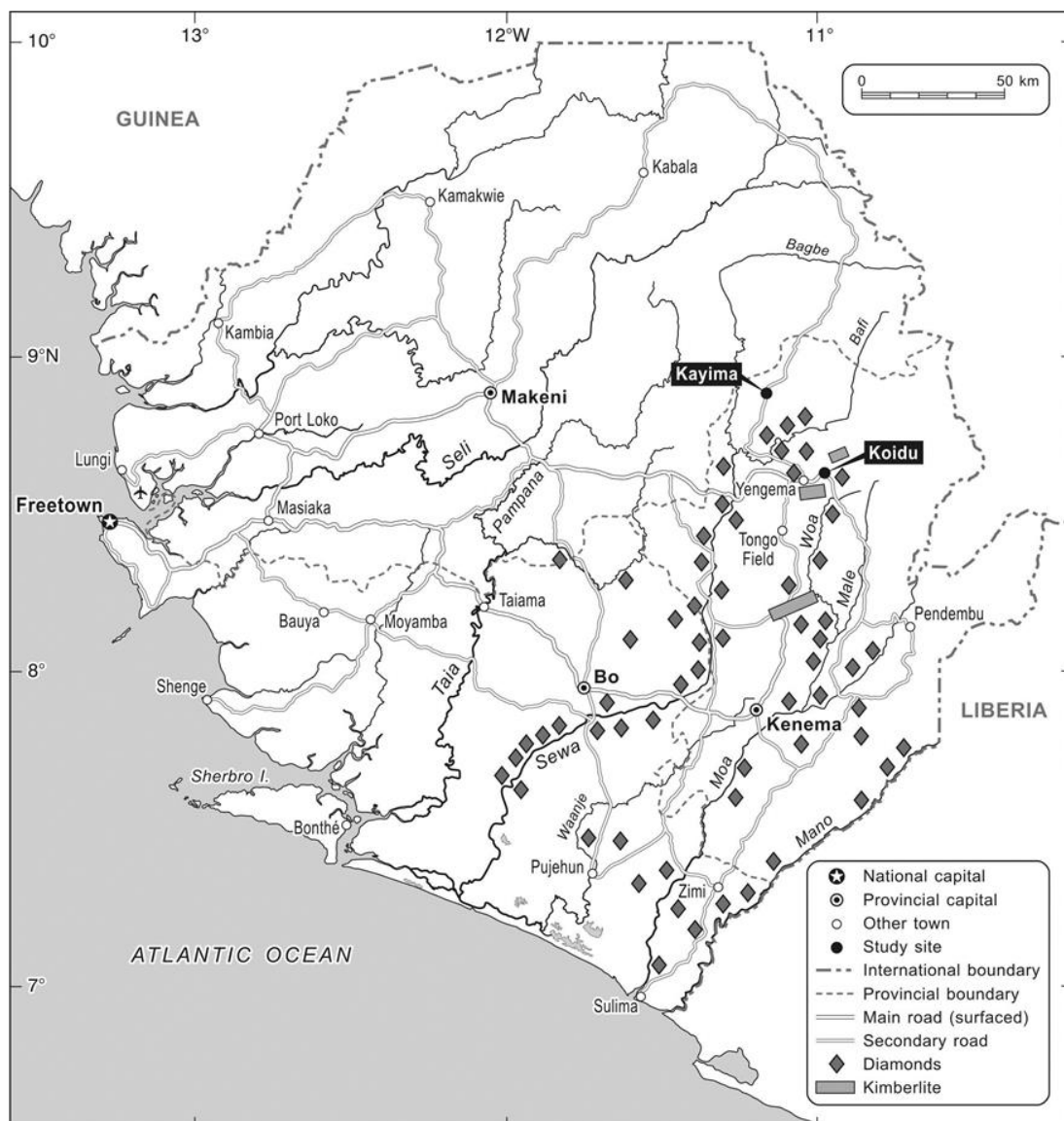
Driven by heightened resource demands for natural resources from the world's emerging economies, particularly the so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the globalization of the extractive industries has led to dramatic technological, organizational and regulatory changes across sub-Saharan Africa and the developing world more broadly. Since 1985, largely as a result of the influence of the World Bank, more than 110 states have adopted new mining codes, or revised existing ones, in an effort to stimulate foreign direct investment (FDI) in mineral extraction (Otto et al., 2006). These efforts have led to an unprecedented increase in the number of international companies engaged in mining and hydrocarbon projects in the developing world (Bebbington et al., 2008). In the majority of situations, the reform and deregulation of mining codes in developing countries have been implemented alongside broader neoliberal agendas, and there remains considerable debate as to whether or not this has had positive impacts on levels of development. While Campbell (2009) suggests that the reform of legal and regulatory frameworks in the mining sectors of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa has led to a more favourable environment for FDI, others who are less optimistic point out that these investments rarely result in local-level benefits. In many cases, as the state is forced to withdraw under the rubric of neoliberalism, and as the privatization of key social service provisioning takes place, extractive industry companies have increasingly been expected to fill these voids by providing the services and infrastructure that government has failed to deliver. More often than not, however, mining companies are unable or unwilling to fulfil these expectations.

The process of mineral extraction itself also frequently leads to serious social and environmental impacts, displacing indigenous populations from their land and transforming local livelihoods. In such contexts, as Bebbington et al. (2008) suggest, investments in mineral extraction have become a particularly contentious and ambiguous face of global capitalist expansion, leading to a pronounced increase in conflict and social mobilization around the detrimental effects of mining and hydrocarbon projects. Accordingly, it has been argued by some commentators (e.g. Ferguson, 2006; Hickey and Bracking, 2005) that the emergence of community-driven social movements might best be understood in terms of their relationship to 'accumulation by exploitation' and 'accumulation by dispossession' (after Harvey, 2003). As will be explored in the context of Sierra Leone in next two sections of the paper, it would appear that the way in which local populations, and particularly the country's burgeoning youth population, perceive and respond to extractive industry investment is playing an important role in shaping how mining companies fashion their business strategies and corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas.

### Youth perspectives

In trying to deepen understanding of how youth perceive mining, and how the agency of youth shapes and responds to extractive industry investment, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in January and June, 2013 with a broad range of young people in and around the Kono diamond mining centre of Koidu in Tankoro Chiefdom, a settlement of 87,539 (see Figure 1). Different self-generating groupings of youth were targeted, including those working as casual labourers in industrial mining operations, those engaged in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) activities, those who had previously mined but had given it up to pursue other livelihood options, and those who had never mined but had rather focused their attention on farming. Following interviews, informants were asked to identify other potential interviewees, and also if they would be willing to join focus groups. Focus groups consisted of 4-5 people and allowed for an in-depth exploration of how, if at all, attitudes varied between groupings.

**Figure 1: Diamondiferous regions of Sierra Leone**



Source: Author's fieldwork

As expected, a wide range of perceptions were reported. For many of those who were engaged in mining at the large-scale level, and to some extent within the ASM sector, there was a general consensus that diamond mining had always been, and would continue to be, an essential livelihood activity in the economy and society of Kono District. While most of the miners interviewed reported that the working conditions they were subjected to, the remuneration they received for their labour, and the uneven distribution of mineral rents associated with the sector were far from desirable, there was also a general feeling that they were fortunate to be employed at all, as livelihood opportunities were few and far between. Many young miners also felt that there was great potential for mining investment to be a more effective driver of local economic development, particularly if the government played a stronger role in negotiating more beneficial conditions in the agreements made with international mining companies.

At the same time, however, some miners were much more outspoken about their perceptions of the industry, and displayed great indignation about the very uneven benefits that mining accrued to different actors within the sector. These discussions revealed that much youth participation in mobilizations driven by mining industry expansion in Kono had crystalized on the back of perceptions of severe exploitation and marginalization by powerful corporate actors. More specifically, there was widespread concern for both the labour exploitation that is characteristic of many mining companies, and for the dispossession of land and other assets that typically occurs during the process of extractive industry expansion. Such sentiments are, of course, not particular to Kono District and other scholars have noted how the un-inclusive and unsustainable nature of mining has also motivated social mobilization in other West African country contexts (see for example, Hilson and Yakovelva, 2007; Pegg, 2006). Putting a more positive spin on this, Bebbington et al. (2008: 893) further add that in some cases, these mobilizations might not always be an indicator of 'development gone wrong', but rather have been associated with the emergence of more inclusive public institutions, which have often led to the defence of human and citizenship rights.

As such, in Kono District, much of the present youth-led activism around the extractive industries is also fundamentally concerned with citizenship rights. Although it has been argued in other African contexts that the struggles of youth are driven by the need to assert an identity (O'Brien, 1996), ideas about rights and identity among Kono youth are strongly tied to livelihood security in whatever form it can be found. The emergence of youth-dominated associational groups, the mobilization of youth-focused civil society groups, and the subsequent youth-led protests that have recently been staged against industrial mining operations in and around Koidu, are examples of how such spaces for citizen engagement in diamond governance may be opening up.

It is worth noting that most diamond mining in Kono District has historically been associated with the ASM sector, an activity demanding heavy inputs of unskilled (youth) labour. In the past, large-scale and capital intensive mining operations have only accounted for some 10 percent of Sierra Leone's diamond exports by value, with the bulk of diamonds coming from ASM production (Diamond Industry Annual Review, 2006). But a recurrent theme in the history of diamond mining areas, especially Kono District, has been confrontation between, on the one hand, state agencies and concession-holding companies seeking greater control over diamond production and, on the other hand, peasants and artisanal miners seeking to maximise their own returns from the industry and defend their putative rights and entitlements. Confrontations of this kind are a signature

feature of bureaucratically weak states, but the presence of diamonds has lent them a particular intensity in Kono District (Maconachie and Fanthorpe, 2009).

However, recent interviews with youth in Koidu also suggest that changes in the local economy in Kono are having bearing on the scope and direction of youth activism. As Kono's prime alluvial diamond areas have become 'mined out' and ASM operations wane in favour of more capital-intensive modes of mechanized extraction (also see NACE monitoring report, 2006), youth-led activism has shifted its focus to a number of high profile international mining companies (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). In this respect, a proliferation of NGO and civil society activities in diamondiferous areas has given many youth the ability to participate in new forms of social activism.

Many of the youth-focused CSOs in Kono that are presently lobbying against mining companies are not suggesting that mining should stop altogether, but rather that institutional arrangements should be put in place to ensure that they are compensated with development investment and better employment opportunities. Discussions with some youth revealed the perception that the permanent closure of large industrial mining operations, such as the kimberlite company Ocea, would be disastrous for the local economy. The main grievance was, in fact, that more benefits must be channelled back into diamondiferous communities, predominantly the creation of more jobs for youth. However, as mining begins to shift to more capital-intensive modes of extraction, and is increasingly becoming attractive to larger companies who aim to pursue deep-shaft mining, it is the youth who are ultimately losing out. While youths are no longer able to engage in ASM activities – a sector which has been notoriously popular with young people because of its low barriers to entry – chiefs and village elites still continue to benefit from rent-seeking activities as new relationships are formed with companies, and income is derived from various corporate kick-backs. In short, declining demand for unskilled labour in the mining sector may thus emerge as one of the greatest challenges for overcoming the social and economic marginalization of youth and related security problems.

While the mobilization of Kono-based youth groups has sought to address the labour issues and employment conditions of predominantly larger-scale mechanized companies, the tension that this has created between companies and communities has, on occasion, led to antagonistic situations that have spiralled out of control. The disturbance at the Ocea (then called Koidu Holdings Limited) blasting area in December 2007, is a case in point. A group, predominantly composed of youths calling itself the Affected Property Owners Association, staged what was initially a peaceful protest outside the company blasting area, to demand a less intrusive schedule of blasting and better compensation for environmental degradation for local residents. These protests were supported by a number of CSOs, but soon turned into a full-scale riot, resulting in the death of two individuals and numerous injuries (see Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). In the aftermath of the disturbance, the government halted company operations pending a Commission of Inquiry into the events. The recommendations of the Commission resulted in a government White Paper that lays out new regulations for corporate social behaviour, but it remains unclear as to whether or not any real lessons were learned from the conflict that took place. More recently, for example, in December 2012, a group of aggrieved mine workers at Ocea staged a peaceful sit-down strike to demonstrate their frustration and dissatisfaction over poor working conditions, and what they believed to be corporate deceit. The atmosphere at the protest was, once again, tense and the situation quickly degenerated into widespread turmoil, as protesting mine workers clashed with armed police guards stationed at the mining concession. Two people were killed and many citizens who had nothing to



do with the protest sustained gunshot wounds, leaving the government no choice but to declare a state of emergency in Koidu and bring in military reinforcements to pacify the situation.

### **Corporate Perspectives**

While the conflicts described above represent extreme examples of occasions where the tension between youth and mining companies have escalated into tragic situations, the demands being placed upon Ocea in Kono District are perhaps illustrative of the wider trends that are currently unfolding across sub-Saharan Africa. In natural resource-rich regions in all corners of the continent, it is clear that mining and oil and gas companies are now increasingly being expected to demonstrate a 'social licence to operate', and to fund and implement community development projects – often taking on responsibilities for which governments have traditionally been liable. Following the initiation of long-term structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, many African governments became powerless to provide services and infrastructure for their citizens, as measures were implemented to reduce spending and the direct economic involvement of the state. These moves were, in rhetoric, taken to facilitate a movement towards the market allocation of resources and to provide an 'enabling environment' for private enterprise to thrive. As noted earlier, however, these draconian 'conditionalities' associated with adjustment and market-led development were underpinned and legitimized by longstanding discourses that concerned 'modernization' and 'progress'.

In the case of Sierra Leone, the devastation caused by a decade of civil war during the 1990s further exacerbated poverty, destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and reduced the capacity of the state to provide development to its citizenry (Maconachie, 2008). In many instances, extractive industry companies in Kono District have indeed embraced the opportunity to fill these development voids in some of the country's most impoverished areas, seeing it as an opening to enhance their international reputations and strengthen their social license to operate. Specifically, a number of mining companies have become particularly focused on contributing to social development programmes for the youth population. For example, Ocea recently launched a programme to promote reading and learning for youth in Koidu schools and the surrounding Kono communities, training teachers and providing reading material to more than 7,000 school children (DIB Online, 2012). The company also spends US\$ 100,000 per year supporting two local premiere league football clubs, an investment that has received the widespread approval of the region's football-passionate youth population. But for the company, questions around youth livelihoods have also become of increasing concern to its CSR strategy (personal communication, Ocea Public Relations Officer, Freetown, 07/06/13), a focus which has perhaps gained much more significance since the forced temporary closure of operations took place following the December 2007 riots

Since corporate performance standards are often voluntary, a number of scholars have argued that for some companies, there may therefore be a clear business motivation to improve corporate reputations and influence the nature of global debates surrounding sustainability (Auty, 1998; Blowfield and Frynas, 2005). From this perspective, as was articulated by the Public Relations Officer at Ocea, there is a clear economic incentive for companies to take CSR on board:

...when you come to operate, you get your mining licence from the government and for that you have an agreement. You have obligations that you are supposed to meet...and as long as these are met, you are fine legally. Nobody is going to take you to a court of

law for meeting your obligations. But what you will not get is a social licence to operate, and that is why mining companies tend to want to embark on corporate social responsibility....You have to embark on activities that will engender a very cordial relationship between your operations and the community, providing you with an enabling environment so that at the end of the day, you are able to carry out your operations and maximise your profit (Octea Public Relations Officer, personal communication, Freetown, 07/06/13).

Based on this position, considerable concerns have been raised by a number of scholars who have demonstrated how elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, extractive industry companies often implement community development programmes with little knowledge or understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of the people's lives in which they operate (Hilson and Banchirigah, 2009; Tschakert, 2009). In extreme cases (e.g. see Gilberthorpe and Banks, 2012), an over-emphasis on meeting global sustainability performance standards has led to inappropriate and ill-conceived development outcomes at the local level, which has resulted in further fragmentation and inequality. This also raises the question of how sincere mining companies actually are about their youth-focused development initiatives, and whether or not the pursuit of 'blueprint' CSR schemes might instead play a role in de-contextualizing local development needs.

Ultimately, unequal power relationships play a central role in reinforcing the most commanding interpretations of 'sustainability', as they become conditioned to serve particular interests. While young people in Kono District are generally in structurally disadvantaged livelihood positions, and are likely to find it difficult to effect meaning change in mining regions, powerful mining companies that are flush with resources are able to control the development process that might take place, and define what 'sustainability' entails on their own terms. As David Mosse (2005: 8) has suggested, '...power lies in the narratives that maintain an organisation's own definition of the problem...[and] success in development depends upon the stabilization of a particular interpretation...'. Dauvergne and Neville (2010) add that in weak states such as Sierra Leone – where governments lack the power to influence the underlying agendas of transnational companies – an absence of state regulatory oversight and control makes it even more unlikely that voluntary corporate initiatives will lead to meaningful environmental and social outcomes. In order for CSR to be both appropriate and effectively operationalized, and therefore a potential vehicle for positive change, corporate-led development initiatives must seek acceptability, credibility, and ultimately legitimacy, from multiple and competing sources. But perhaps being central to this task is a more explicit appreciation of the unequal power relations between different stakeholders in mining investments and a recognition of their varying agendas, which should help to ensure that the needs of youth are more fully incorporated into CSR strategies.

## **Conclusion**

While Sierra Leone is still recovering from the brutal legacy of its recent diamond-fuelled civil war, the country is now positioned on the verge of an unprecedented period of economic growth, driven principally by the discovery of vast new deposits of strategic minerals. Most notably, recent international investments in the exploitation of iron ore and the discovery of commercially-viable offshore oil deposits on the Sierra Leone-Liberia basin, suggest that the management of natural resources will continue to assume a high priority on both political and development agendas. However, a number of other recent international investments in the country's natural resource

sectors have been overshadowed by social and environmental grievances by local populations. For example, the degradation associated with rutile mining and the expropriation of vast areas of land for growing commercial bio-fuel crops for export, have increasingly fuelled conflict rather than stimulated development within catchment communities. In the wake of a pending 'revenue bonanza' driven by natural resource exploitation, the question of how resource benefits will be channelled back to their communities of origin, and indeed the general populace at large, has returned to centre stage. Perhaps at the heart of these concerns are the very issues raised in this paper that concern relationships between youth, companies and extractive industry investment.

While young people in Sierra Leone continue to remain at the margins of most of the major mineral investments that have recently taken place, a resource boom has also opened up new opportunities for young people to become involved in development brokerage. For example, some mining-based youth advocacy groups have found new opportunities for attracting external development funding from international actors. As poverty and hardship have become entrenched during the post-war period, evidence suggests that some youth may be drawing upon mining-focused social activism as a new livelihood strategy and an avenue to advance their causes. The same marginalization that has constrained many young people has also in many ways fostered great resourcefulness and opened up new possibilities for capturing resources.

But perhaps a broader final conclusion that emerges is that there is a pressing need to reconsider the diverse range of corporate responses to youth mobilizations around extractive industry, and reflect upon how these have enhanced interests in youth issues and sustainability issues. While it is clear that youth-focused community development initiatives are increasingly becoming central to the business strategies of mining companies, a multiplicity of sustainability agendas must be accommodated in order to insulate corporate actors from potential risks and to protect their 'social license to operate'. Understanding how diverse interpretations of sustainability become shaped by conflicting interests and underlying agendas remains critical for ensuring that young people in Sierra Leone become included in development processes that have for so long been dominated by powerful actors.

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